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PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #0590/01 1151554
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 251554Z APR 07
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8025
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 1043
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000590

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/MARCHESE/HARDING

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/25/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: MOHAMMAD SAMMAK WORRIED ABOUT EXTREMISM
BUT PREDICTS POLITICAL CRISIS WILL END

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
) .

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Lebanon is proud of its tradition as the only Arab democracy in the Middle East; however democracy is not the priority for the country - national unity is, according to interfaith dialogue leader Mohammad Sammak. Sunni extremism, especially in northern Lebanon, is growing and is being financed by outside actors who use poverty and ignorance to promote radicalism. Sammak called combating extremism a "race against time" and lamented that his group, the Lebanese Government, and even the Hariri family * whom he said was still an influential force in the North * are all working too slowly in quelling radicalism. Sammak discounted a two government scenario in November and was confident a compromise candidate for president will be found. He is optimistic that the Special Tribunal will be approved by the end of the month. End Summary.

LEBANON,S RELIGIOUS FREEDOM BOTH
A STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS

¶2. (SBU) Secretary General of the Christian-Muslim Committee for Dialogue Mohammad Sammak began an 16 April meeting with Econoff by noting the interconnection between religious groups and political life. Surrounded by pictures of assassinated former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and religious leaders such as Pope John Paul II, Lebanon,s Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, and Mufti of Lebanon Sheik Qabbani, Sammak read excerpts from a letter a French diplomat posted from Lebanon in the late 1800s. The diplomat described relations among Lebanon,s numerous sects, describing the complex links between religion and politics. Sammak noted how little has changed in Lebanon and how the country is a microcosm of the Middle East.

¶3. (SBU) Sammak stated Lebanon was unique among Arab countries in its freedom of religious practice. Other countries may give lip service to religious tolerance, but have restricted the practices of different groups, such as the Shia in Saudi Arabia and the Copts in Egypt. This is one of Lebanon,s strengths, he said, but at times it causes tension and violence between the various groups.

NORTHERN SUNNI EXTREMISM GROWING

¶4. (C) Sunni extremism, especially in northern Lebanon, has grown over the last two years and is being financed by outside actors who use poverty and ignorance to promote radicalism. Syria is using extremist groups and the instability they create to make their own activities within Lebanon easier. He said the Syrians are using Palestinian camps in Sidon, Tyre, and the Bekaa Valley to promote extremism, and to use as bases for the transfer of money and weapons.

¶5. (C) Sammak said the best way to combat radicalism, which historically was not indigenous to Lebanon, was through the mosques. His group was trying to promote moderates who preached cooperation and nonviolence. Sammak claimed to have, but did not provide, names of extremists and muftis who were promoting extremism and cultivating a culture of suicide. He said these people were being watched closely, and the Lebanese intelligence services knew who they were.

¶6. (SBU) Sammak saw combating extremism as a race against time. He lamented that his own group, the Lebanese government, and even the Hariri family * which he said was still an influential force in the North * are all working too slowly to fight radicalism. He noted that much can be done and there are available resources, but there is no plan. Lebanese leaders whom he knows well seem unsure about how to address extremism.

DEMOCRACY NOT A PRIORITY

¶7. (SBU) Sammak said Lebanon is proud of its tradition as the only Arab democracy in the Middle East, but democracy as such is not the priority for the country or the government. National unity should be the most important issue, and

BEIRUT 00000590 002 OF 003

Lebanon's democratic system should be used to promote that unity. Sammak recalled the year 1989 when sectarian leaders met to negotiate the Taif Accord to end the Civil War. At that time, they reaffirmed Lebanon's democratic principles. Sammak noted that Islamic fundamentalism at the time was at an all-time high, but despite radicalism, Lebanon's Muslim, Druze, and Christian leaders chose to elect a Christian president. Muslims also agreed to a 50-50 Muslim-Christian split in government institutions. This, he says, highlights how democracy served to keep Lebanon's national unity and balance between among communities. When queried whether Taif should be renegotiated given Lebanon's changing demographics, Sammak replied Taif does not need to be redone, but that all its parts need to be implemented.

TRIBUNAL WILL BE ESTABLISHED;
POLITICAL STALEMATE WILL END

¶8. (SBU) Sammak had an absolute belief that the special tribunal to try suspects in the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri would be officially approved by the UN by the end of the month. He stated that a Chapter VII "imposition" will take the burden off the Lebanese. He did not think there would be any violence from the opposition because they would not be willing to "face down" the entire international community. Sammak believed that after the tribunal is approved, Hizballah will "relax" because Iran and Syria will have seen that Hizballah did all it could to forestall the tribunal. He noted Hizballah can then focus on elections, forming a new government, and the presidency, making the resolution of the political crisis easier.

¶9. (SBU) Sammak doubted that there will be a two-government scenario in November, and that a compromise candidate for president will be found. He said there are hundreds of candidates because, "every Maronite believes he is qualified." Sammak believed there will be a shuffle among the Maronites of both sides and the Christians will start to

fight even more among themselves. This will need to a "new situation" that could help break the deadlock. Besides, he added, most of the leaders lived through the last dueling governments and they recognize how expensive and destructive that can be.

SAAD HARIRI GROWING UP

¶10. (SBU) Sammak served as a former advisor to the late Rafiq Hariri and now helps his political heir, Saad Hariri, navigate Lebanese politics. Sammak noted that Rafiq kept his family away from Lebanese politics and even from business in Lebanon. After Rafiq's death, however, the Sunni community was leaderless and expected the Hariri family to select another member of the family to take up Rafiq's mantle as a symbol of their commitment to Rafiq's political agenda. Saad Hariri came into Lebanese politics unaware of who is who or the details of the political game. As a result, he made mistakes. But, according to Sammak, Saad recognized his shortcomings and asked for help, keeping on many of his father's advisors. Saad has worked hard, learned quickly, and is now playing a leadership role. He hates to be characterized as only a Sunni leader, and thus he is cooperating with the Christians, the Shia, and the Druze.

¶11. (SBU) Sammak believed Saad was not interested in taking over the prime minister position in the near future, even if President Lahoud is replaced in November. Moreover, Sammak believed Hizballah had no intention of changing the government, because this step would require a new government policy statement. The current policy statement supports the right of the resistance, and Hizballah knows a new government would never agree to that again. Even though the group hates Prime Minister Siniora, Hizballah would probably like to keep the government largely the same. Sammak noted that Hizballah, Aoun, and Speaker of Parliament Berri only want the expansion to include Aoun supporters, not other leaders such as Suleiman Franjeh or Talal Arslan.

¶12. (SBU) Sammak is open about his bias toward the Hariri family but maintains good ties to other influential leaders. He stated there is no such thing as a permanent coalition in Lebanon. Upcoming issues such as the presidency, early parliamentary elections, and regional changes strain any coalition and could "unblock" the current crisis. Lebanon is based on personality politics, and this causes continuous

BEIRUT 00000590 003 OF 003

changes in alliances as leaders protect their own narrow interests. Sammak noted that this trend bodes ill for Christian leader Michel Aoun's chances at the presidency; Sammak does not believe Hizballah or Berri would seriously support Aoun for president. They would, however, nominate him to prevent a strong March 14 candidate; both sides would then have to select second or third choices who would be weaker candidates.

FELTMAN